

The Politics of Christianity

Matthew 22:15-22

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's Episcopal Church on October 18, 2020

Jesus' famous instruction to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's can sound like a well-meaning reminder to keep your religion out of your politics and your politics out of your religion. Given where we are, just weeks away from an historically wearying and polarizing presidential election, that we simultaneously can't stop thinking about and can't wait to be over, such advice may feel like a balm. It may feel like just what the doctor ordered—and especially on a Sunday. Isn't Sunday meant to be an escape from the chaos of the previous six days. A comfort to the weary soul. A sanctuary of hope apart from the increasingly dark and depressing world. Why would we risk bringing something so combustible as politics into this sacred space?

Unfortunately, I don't think Jesus is saying what it sounds like he is saying at first. Let's take another look: If Jesus says, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and give to God what is God's," then that leads us to a natural follow-up question. Well, what exactly belongs to the emperor? And what belongs to God? Let's start with God, because that one is easier.

What belongs to God is, quite simply, everything. God created everything. God sustains everything. Everything belongs to God. This obviously complicates any answer one might try to give about what they believe belongs to the emperor or anyone else. In other words, the way in which any thing "belongs" to the emperor is categorically different than the way anything belong to God. Things can only belong to the emperor in a provisional, temporary sort of way, and even then that ownership does not in a way cancel out or supersede God's ownership. Whatever the emperor owns, whatever we own for that matter, is more in the manner of a steward. A tenant. Like in the parable we discussed a couple weeks ago. The emperor can own a horse, for example, and he can train and ride and care for that horse; he could also take it into battle, abuse it, underfeed it, or sell it, but at no time in the life of the horse does it not more ultimately belong to God. God creates and sustains the life of the horse and desires for its flourishing as God does for every inch of his world. The emperor gets to decide how to use it, but the emperor doesn't get to determine what it is created for. And his use can accord with those purposes or not.

What is presumed to "belong" to the emperor in this parable is a coin. This is a particular coin too. It's a denarius. A Roman coin. A coin that has the face of the emperor on it, and an inscription that read "Caesar, Son of the Divine." This was not a coin that Jews would have used in their everyday commerce, since a graven image of somebody calling themselves God breaks the 2nd commandment, but they were required to have it to pay the Roman tax. So the coin that belongs to the emperor is a symbol of the taxes that belong to the emperor. The taxes that belong to the emperor are a symbol for the government that belongs to the emperor. This is the trap the Pharisees and Herodians are trying to trap Jesus in: They are trying to put him into a corner where he can't win—one answer will make him out to be a dangerous enemy of the empire, the other will make him a corporate sell out.

Jesus says give Caesar's coins back to Caesar. He says pay your taxes. If you want to walk the symbol ladder all the way back, I don't think it is a misreading to say that Jesus is saying you should participate in politics. We should. But then remember the trick—don't think for one second that politics don't also belong to God. Or that God doesn't have desires and intentions for how and what our politics are.

I should clarify, by politics I don't mean voting. Voting is one tiny—important, yes—but very tiny part of what it means to participate in politics. What the word politics really refers to in a lowercase sense of the word is the ways through which we forge and sustain patterns of our common life. That's it. It's how we work out living together in a society. It comes from the Greek word *polis*, which just means city. Voting is part of that in that it determines who gets to sit in temporary seats of decision-making—at least in theory. But paying your taxes is also part of what it means to participate in our politics. Taking out your trash is part of what it means to be political. From letting your neighbor borrow a cup of flour to organizing your neighborhood 4th of July parade to grocery shopping to registering your car to tending your garden to educating your children to giving money to your church—all of these things are political acts. They are ways of shaping society in one way or another. And everything that shapes society, for better or worse, can be called politics.

And it should not be a surprise that all of these things are things that God cares very much about. God cares *very* much about how we forge and sustain habits of caring for one another. This is kind of one of Jesus' main points: Love your neighbor. A better way to think about the word politics is that it is just shorthand for the ways that we try to care for our neighbors while we wait for the consummation of God's kingdom.

The point of all this is that religion and politics are not categories of life that are sealed off from one another. You can't just "have your politics" here and then "have your Christianity" over here. Inasmuch as Christianity is about loving your neighbor, it is about your politics. When Jesus says "Give to God what is God's," he means you give everything to God, including your politics. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's means don't be pie-in-the-sky-nothing-matters-because-i'm-going-to-heaven-one-day, but instead pay attention to the details of the world you live in now such that you can create an abundant community of love, truth, forgiveness, and grace.

You don't get to have politics that have nothing to do with your Christianity. Because you are at the most deep down; the identity at the core of your being, is the one given to you at your baptism. Every other identity, be in Republican or Democrat, Astros or Rangers, Texan or Arkansan, is just decoration compared to that. It's just the clothes; it's not who you are.

What I mean that feels most relevant to our current moment is this: We can disagree over aspects of Republican policy vs. Democratic policy, but we as Christians should not struggle to agree upon our criteria for evaluating those policies—it should be a debate about which ones help us better love our neighbor. Which ones make this world look a little more like the kingdom of God.

Something I love about our parish is that we don't pedal partisan politics from the pulpit or really anywhere else in our programming. You don't have to be a Democrat to belong here. You don't have to be a Republican to be a beloved member of this community. St. Mark's has had a longstanding commitment to being a place where a diversity of opinion can not only exist but is itself understood here as a sign of good health and a contributing factor to our mutual flourishing. It is one of the main reasons I wanted to come here. Our vision for our church

is that there is room here for any and every kind of Christian. We believe that the Nicene Creed is a sufficient statement of Christian belief; we believe there is room to disagree about the rest.

But this commitment to diversity and hospitality does not mean that we are not a political church. To be a Christian is to be political. Not to be partisan necessarily. But it is to care very deeply indeed about how our world is ordered. And to act with compassion and courage to love our neighbor. That is our invitation today.

Yes, church can still be a safe sanctuary from a world in chaos. But we must understand that even that act of being sanctuary is a mechanism of the church's political action. That is actually how the church spread in the early days of the Roman Empire—no one else would care for the lepers; no one else would care for the sick. This commitment to caring for those on the margins led to the Church literally inventing hospitals. It's not a choice between engaging in politics or not. It is understanding that we are participating in politics whether we like it or not. And to do the best we can to make our engagement as individuals and as a body to love our neighbors the best we can. Which is part of our process of discipleship, of our giving everything to God that is God's.

Amen.